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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the social forces acting upon community colleges, this paper reviews possible modes of response by the colleges, focusing specifically on the role of institutional research. The first section presents an overview of the social forces affecting community colleges, discussing the 16% increase in two-year college enrollments in the 1980's; the impact of limited federal, state, and local funding; the financial stress caused by growing prison populations, health care costs, and public school costs; increasing percentages of minorities and changing family demographics; and the declining availability of full-time work. The next section discusses possible modes of response by the community colleges. Likely responses include establishing or maintaining affirmative action programs, increased use of advanced technology to provide instruction, an increased importance assigned to institutional research to enable colleges to adapt, a continued emphasis on accountability, and a decision on the part of colleges to become more elitist or retain a traditional open-admissions orientation. The last section focuses on the role of institutional research in the changing world of the community college, emphasizing the importance of colleges taking a proactive, rather than reactive, stance. With a proactive approach, institutional research will produce more than routine descriptive statistics; it provide models for long-term planning in a rapidly changing environment. A 27-item bibliography is included. (MAB)

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SOCIAL CHANGE, THE FUTURE OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE, AND THE FUTURE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE RESEARCH

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Social Change, the Future of the Community College, and the Future of Community College Research

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The purposes of this paper are three: to present a brief overview of the social forces acting on the community college, to suggest a few possible modes of response by the community college, and to suggest how this may affect the role of the institutional researcher.

Social Forces

The social forces acting on the community college are many. We are intimately, painfully familiar with the economic crunch facing higher education (e.g., Hyatt, Shulman & Santiago, 1984; Levin, Perkins & Clowes, 1992; National Center for Education Statistics, 1993). During the 1980s, enrollment in two-year institutions increased 16 percent; during the next decade an additional 13 percent increase in enrollment is projected by NCES. Student-faculty ratios have increased and will continue to do so; counseling and library staffing has decreased and probably will continue to do so. Tuition has increased, and will continue to do so. Federal, state, and local tax dollars for higher education have declined and will continue to do so.

These impacts on community colleges are symptoms of much larger trends. For example, during the 1980s we witnessed a 134% increase in prisoners (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1992a). As of 31 December 1990, 774,375 prisoners were held in state or federal custody, an increase of 8.7% over 1989 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1992b). Most estimates of cost/prisoner/year are in excess of $20,000, exclusive of capital costs of approximately $50,000/cell. Since the rate of imprisonment is expected to accelerate, and since most of this increase is at the state level, state budgets are being crunched by convicts.

From the perspective of the state budgets, prisons are not the only problem. States are also being heavily hit by increases in funding for Medicare and Medicaid, as well as for public schools. In most states, higher education is one of the few discretionary categories

that can take a hit without massive outcry. Higher ed has been hit, and will continue to be hit. For example, 37% of public community colleges reported decreases in campus operating budgets from 1990-91 to 1991-92, and more than half of senior community college administrators reported that budget cuts and reduced revenue constituted the most important campus issue. (The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac, 1992).

It is not only government that has been changing. The distribution of minority populations has been changing dramatically. For example, Hodgkinson (1992) used Census Bureau projections for the year 2010 to look at the distribution of race among children up to 17 years. He concluded that by 2010, nonwhite children will outnumber white children in Louisiana, New York, Florida, California, Texas, Hawaii, and the District of Columbia. Further, Hodgkinson provides data which suggest that over the next two decades minority children in virtually every state will increase as a percentage of the total child population. This increase in the nonwhite population will occur in the face of increased black infant mortality, and in the presence of a decline in white infant mortality (Brown, 1993), and the epidemic of young poor urban black male homicide victims (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1991).

The social context for the community college has also been changing in other ways. From 1980-1990, there were massive shifts in household type. Singles living alone increased 25%, singles living with non-relatives increased 45%, and male single parents increased 87%. Married couples without children increased 15%, but married couples with children declined by 1% (Bureau of the Census, 1990, cited by Hodgkinson, 1992). It does not take a rocket scientist to see that our society is changing, and changing fast.

When one looks at more recent data on the distribution of households, the picture does not get more stable (Table 1). In 1970, 70% of U.S. households contained a married couple, while in 1992 only 55% contained a married couple. In 1970, about 40% of households contained a married couple with at least one of their children, versus about 25% in 1992. In 1970, 17% of households contained only an individual living alone, versus 25% in 1992. In 1970, 12% of total households consisted of a female living alone, while in 1992, 15% of total households consisted of a female living alone. By 1992, the number of households that contained only an individual living alone (23,974,000) came very close to the number of households containing a married couple with at least one of their children (24,420,000)(Bureau of the Census, 1992).

	1970	1992
Married couple	70.5%	54.8%
Married, >= 1 child	40.3%	25.5%
Home alone	17.1%	25.1%
Female alone	11.5%	15%
Total Households	63,401,000	95,669,000

Table 1. Percentage of total households, 1970 vs. 1992. (Bureau of the Census, 1992).

The data discussed above may be just the tip of the iceberg. Some scholars (Popenoe, 1993) have concluded that ". . . the disintegration of the well-functioning, two-parent family over the past three decades poses a serious national threat . . . . The evidence suggests that we may have the first generation of children and youths in our history who are less well off -- psychologically, socially, economically, and morally -- than their parents were at the same age" (p. A-48).

The problems of the public education system are the basis for headlines nearly daily. However, Hodgkinson (1992) argues that if one partials out the effects of poverty, the public schools are doing reasonably well. Speaking of the effects of poverty, "Because home prices have risen faster than income over the last couple of decades, it's gotten harder for people to buy that first home" (Bureau of the Census, 1993, p. 1). And that's no wonder. "Between 1973 and 1990, the median inflation-adjusted income of families with children headed by a parent under age 30 dropped by 32 percent. The economic security of young families has declined for many reasons, including the lack of growth in high-wage, high-benefit jobs, such as those in manufacturing; the decline in unionization; competition from recent immigrants for lower wage jobs; the isolation of inner-city residents from suburban jobs; and the inadequacy of worker skills for technically demanding positions" (National Research Council, 1993, p. 3).

Health is also a major issue. For example, "Public health officials blame most of the recent U.S. upswing [recent measles epidemics] on parents' growing failure to vaccinate their children" (Weis, 1992, p. 547). And, "Adolescents from low income families . . . experience higher rates of poor physical health, mental disorders, and depression" (National Research Council, 1993, 42). Further, as the lifespan is extended and the baby boomers wax elderly, health and impairment in old age will become a more significant issue and will interact in uncomfortable ways with other variables. For example, there is a negative correlation between educational level and cognitive impairment among the old (Suzman, Willis, & Manton,

1992). And of course, there is AIDS.

Work is also a major issue. For example, "Although the evidence is not yet definitive, some labor-market experts now predict that there may never again be enough decently paid full-time work for the available workers, in this country or elsewhere" (Gans, 1993, p. B-3). Hodgkinson (1992) argues that "The best guess is that we are creating two work forces: one in minimum wage occupations that can be performed by high school dropouts . . . and the other in well-paid occupations in technical or administrative positions that need a college degree for entry"(p. 9).

Hodgkinson supports the notion of the declining middle class with a broad base of data and projections. If his conclusion is correct, one would expect social instability to be forthcoming. From a variety of other perspectives, social instability is also predicted by a wide range of futurists (see, e.g., Tafoya, 1986; McCord & Wicker, 1990; Toffler & Toffler, 1990; Sewell, 1992). Further, the crime trends to date do not look good. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (Crime data, 1992) reports that there were more reported violent crimes in 1991 than ever before. Index crimes (selected violent and property offenses) increased more than 15% from 1982 to 1991. And let us not forget the impact of humans on the global ecosystem and the impact of technology on both the ecosystem and social institutions (e.g., Kennedy, 1993).

From the above notions and others we read about daily, it should be clear that we live in a world of serious challenges (for the optimists) or threats (for the realists). How will the community college cope?

Choices

The community college may choose from a variety of behavioral modes, some are pre-ordained, while some are uncertain at best. The behavioral modes may be either proactive (in the stronger colleges, with well thought-out visions) or reactive (often in struggling institutions). Whether a particular mode is proactive or reactive will be in part a consequence of the ability of the institutional researcher. I will discuss only a few behavioral modes here, although the set is very large.

A behavioral mode that will be emphasized by nearly all colleges is affirmative action. For a variety of reasons many colleges have already adopted affirmative action programs. We will have to face the question, "What will we call 'minorities' when they are more than half the population?"(Hodgkinson, 1992, p. 18). Affirmative action programs will become more specialized, will target declining community college populations (e.g., males), and will become more central to college planning.

Another nearly universal behavioral mode will be the increasingly remote connection between faculty and students. The electronicking of teaching and advising will be driven by budget -- we simply will not have the luxury of eyeball-to-eyeball contact. Whether by satellite or by an enhanced Internet data path, instruction will be by image, not by a living human being. Students will be deprived of direct and especially informal contact with faculty. Even student advising will be more by AI systems or their successors, than by appointment in a faculty office. The modal individualized student-faculty contact is likely to be via e-mail.

A third ubiquitous behavioral mode will be the enhanced importance of institutional research. In the unstable environment we are facing, colleges not fast on their feet will be knocked off their feet. Institutional research will be crucial for institutional survival.

Accountability and its cousin, countability, will be with us for a long time. Budget exigencies will also be with us for a long time, and will drive models such as evaluation, assessment, and the quality improvement fetish. Beneath the surface, cost-effectiveness and cost-efficiency will reign. For this reason, too, the institutional researcher's role will be more central than heretofore.

One uncertainty is whether community colleges will choose to capitalize on the expected increase in social unrest. Obvious opportunities include credit and non-credit courses on security systems, security officer training, law enforcement, corrections, investigations, crime prevention, martial arts, firearms, battlefield first aid, and defensive tactics, perhaps even Vigilante I and II. Most of these and more exist in some community colleges now, but the social climate of the future may make these specialty fields real growth areas.

Another uncertainty is whether community colleges will choose to become more elitist, or more traditional in their orientation. The elitist college will focus on the highly qualified transfer student and perhaps on the high level technical student (e.g., engineering design rather than drafting, automotive analysis rather than automotive repair). Its faculty will be happier, will not work as hard, and will be much prouder of the institution. Students will share the faculty's pride in their college. The elite community college will be much better off financially, since both its reputation and the pocketbooks of its alumni will be greater.

On the other hand, the more traditional community college will increasingly be seen as a charity case. It will focus on remediating the failures passed on by the deteriorated family, by the deteriorated public school, and by other dysfunctional social institutions (see, e.g., Mercer, 1993). Since those unsuccessful students are many, and gifted with multiple problems, they have the potential for consuming nearly infinite resources. Further, "success" (almost no matter how it is defined) is less likely to be seen at the traditional community college; unsuccessful students are very difficult to get onto a "success" track, while successful students are easy to keep there. An extension of Levin's Law[3] appears to be operating here: the college that attempts to help the downtrodden, will become downtrodden itself.

There are many other uncertainties. Will community colleges teach citizens how to communicate in a culturally diverse society? Will they teach citizens how to raise children in a society whose structure is increasingly hostile to child development? Will they teach citizens how to cope with increasing governmental restrictions and programs? Will they teach citizens how to cope with looming futures? And as mentioned above and most important for their own survival, will they merely respond, or will they (perish the thought!) be proactive?

IR For The Future

Whichever direction the college chooses, IR will not be just more of what it has been. If community colleges choose to remain response-oriented, then IR will not change a lot, but both IR and the college will be trampled by events. If instead, the college chooses a proactive model, the institutional researcher will become more an intelligence agent and less a number-cruncher. The researcher will be expected to provide pithy information on and predictions about a rapidly changing socio-economic surround.

IR must also learn to operate in a more conflict-laden context. For example, does one stop a large, high-demand training program if one knows there are no jobs to be had but the students have nowhere else to go? How does one help the institution develop the coping skills that will be required for truly hostile learners? And how does the researcher help the college decide what its mission is, in this lurching reality?

The life of the researcher will wax more complex, although more central to the community college. For example, the greater impact of external coalition politics will demand changes in what the researcher measures. As a facet of routine environmental sensing, the researcher will be expected to measure and make meaningful for the president multiple dimensions of the political winds. Further, prediction of physical security of the campus and its community may well be tasked to IR.

In order to efficiently examine social trends, the researcher will need to study the social and behavioral research literature, including areas such as group dynamics and social problems. This literature, seldom systematically addressed by institutional researchers, has a multitude of riches for those attempting to predict social behavior as it affects social institutions (such as community colleges).

Routine descriptive statistics will still have its place, but it will be a limited one. We do not live in a univariate world. As budgets crunch repeatedly and inexorably, and presidents become more sophisticated, researchers will be expected to do far more than describe and analyze putatively linear trends. The researcher will be expected to provide models for long-term planning in an environment where revolution is more characteristic than evolution.

An interesting suggestion (Stix, 1993) regards means of data presentation. The traditional visual graph may be on its way out. Even skilled researchers have difficulty processing more than three or four dimensions on a single graph. Stix suggests that "data-driven sound" [audification, sonification] may be of utility. Stix reports that ". . . cybernetic audiophiles believe sound may complement or, in some cases, even surpass visual graphics"(p. 103).

We must develop and apply models that take into account the predictably non-rational and the irrational. Fuzzy sets will be understood as the norm; models that assume bright lines between decision categories will likely bite the dust.

We must also develop means by which to measure and communicate the effectiveness of new modes of instruction, and make sure that those measures and communications resonate with the multiple constituencies that will be affecting the institution. In essence, the present student educational outcomes assessment is only the nose of the inevitable camel. The day of the professor as sole judge of his performance is behind us.

Both among individuals and among colleges, the future will have winners and losers. Who wins and who loses will be determined in large part by the choices made. The quality of choices is often, but not always (Morgan, 1993) controlled by the quality of the information available and the means of evaluating it. Therefore, the role of IR will be crucial.

I believe that the role of the institutional researcher will become pivotal to the success -- indeed the survival -- of the college. IR may also be expanded as an information source for individual students and prospective non-students. Indeed, who should be better suited to provide information on what the future holds?

The future is coming, we hope, and it is not a linear extrapolation from the past. We're in for a fast ride. I leave you with words I've stolen from Bill Tafoya (1993): "My counsel is in a direction diametrically opposite from moderation and modest expectations. I urge you to advocate and strive towards positive, skillfully researched, well planned change. Having done that, I exhort you further to disdain restraint in your professional pursuits and go for the gold. It is my contention that leaders do not lead from the back of the pack nor the middle of the road; they are out in front of the herd . . . those who believe that it can't be done, should get out of the way of those doing it"(p. 3).

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[2] James R. Perkins and Darrel A. Clowes suggested useful changes from an earlier draft; the remaining flaws are the author's alone.

[3] For the uninitiated, Levin's Law is, "Them what has, gits; from them what doesn't have, gets taken what little they do have."

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